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## PSALM 8: AN INTERPRETATION.

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*Yahweh, our Lord,  
How excellent is thy name  
In all the earth!  
Thou, whose glory is proclaimed<sup>1</sup> throughout the heavens.  
Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings  
Hast thou ordained praise,  
Because of thine adversaries,  
To still the foe and the enemy.  
When I behold thy heaven, the work of thy fingers,  
The moon and the stars which thou hast established:  
What is man that thou art mindful of him,  
The son of man that thou considerest him!  
Yet hast thou made him a little lower than a god,  
With glory and honor hast thou crowned him;  
Thou gavest him dominion over the works of thy hands,  
All things hast thou laid at his feet.  
Sheep and oxen all alike,  
Yea, and the beasts of the field,  
The fowl of the air and the fish of the sea,  
Whatsoever passeth through the paths of the waters.  
Yahweh, our Lord,  
How excellent is thy name  
In all the earth!*

THE psalm is a hymn in praise of God's glory. Such hymns are sung by the congregations gathered in the outer courts of Yahweh for his praise (hence the expression "our Lord"); in

<sup>1</sup> Read *tunna*.

such a situation one naturally reflects about all the things in the world which praise the name of God. Grand is the way in which the poet begins: Not only by the small body of men gathered here is God's praise told, but heaven and earth are filled with it. The earth beneath and the creatures of heaven above, the witnesses of the wondrous doings of God—they all proclaim his praise and magnify his great name. The form of these lines is one very frequently occurring in hymns, *i. e.*, some quality of God which is especially worthy of admiration is extolled: Yahweh is holy, awe-inspiring, good, and merciful; his name is glorious; and so forth; compare 1 Sam. 2:2, 3<sup>b</sup>, Isa. 6:3; Ps. 89:9; 103:8, and others.

The second strophe continues in a strange contrast: This God, whose majesty is praised by the whole vast universe, likes to be praised by "babes and sucklings," and this silences the enemies and adversaries who deride his name. Such, as we know, is the way of our God. God works his great miracles by means that seem to be quite insufficient, in order that his power may be revealed the more clearly. To the infinite fury of the sea he set as a limit the sand: that which is scattered by each breeze must, according to God's will, restrain the primeval power of the waves. God preserved the prophet Elisha from famine in a wonderful way by means of the widow who herself owned nothing. And so God puts the mighty adversaries to silence by the mouth of children. God has chosen the weak in the world to abash the strong. Thus David proclaimed the name of Yahweh in his fight with the Goliath and felled the giant: "Thou comest to me with sword, spear, and shield; but I come to thee in the name of Yahweh Sabaoth whom thou hast blasphemed; this day Yahweh will give thee into my hand, that all lands may learn that Israel has a God." Thus God chose the boy Samuel and revealed to him the destiny of Eli's wicked sons. Joseph was a boy when he had his dreams; and the boy Daniel knew more than all the wise men of Babylon. These or similar tales the psalmist has in mind; we find such general allusions to sacred history also in other passages of the hymns (*cf.* Isa. 43:16 f.; Pss. 65:8 f.; 66:6, 10 f.; 111:3 ff.).

Thus far the introduction of the poem, of which the first line is repeated at the end; we may imagine that, in the most ancient form of presentation, the introduction and conclusion of such a psalm were sung by the chorus.

Here ensues the middle portion of the poem, which treats of another subject — of man's position in the world. In this middle portion the chorus no longer speaks, but an individual; it is no "choral song," but a hymn (compare the "I"). It is night. The eye of the poet looks at the vast sky and at the wonderful stars that stand there; he remembers that all of them are creatures of God; and now it occurs to him how little man is compared with the celestial bodies; how entirely unworthy he is of the care of the Almighty. And yet the same man is, according to God's will, a king, even a god in his world. With pride the psalmist surveys man's kingdom; he commands his cattle and flocks; he subdues the wild animals; he knows how to capture even the birds, and the fish of the sea. He is the master, at whose feet are all things; with royal glory is he crowned; indeed, God has made him "little lower than the deity itself." This expression — the most forcible that the poet can use — is not intelligible to us by itself. Old Testament usage — apparently a relic of the most ancient polytheism — often does not take offense at the mention of many "gods" if only the one thing is certain, that the One, Yahweh, alone is worshiped. Thus it is believed that there are many beings, more or less mighty, who all belong to the deity. In this sense only does the psalmist speak of the "deity," whose power and glory man does not entirely fail to equal. He makes a difference between this "deity" and Yahweh himself; he addresses Yahweh ("thou"), but he speaks of the deity in the third person. With the Most High God, Yahweh, man must not be compared, but he is almost like the lower beings in the "deity," the "angels" (as the old translations say rightly). The psalmist means here the same thing as the very ancient account of creation, reflected in the psalm, according to which man is created "in the image of the deity" (but not of Yahweh). The same is meant by the German poet who calls man "*den kleinen Gott der Welt.*"

Paganism also knows such ideas of man's majesty. "Much that is powerful lives, but nothing is more powerful than man." These are the most ancient ideas of humanity. Man awakening from the dream of childhood and looking about himself with clear eyes finds in the world nothing greater—than himself! He bursts into astonishment and exultation over the majesty of human nature. But, differing from the Greek poet, the psalmist does not stop with this thought; he puts in striking contrast with the joy over human glory the humble realization that man by nature is absolutely unworthy of the high position which God has given him; the psalmist sings no hymn to man, but to God, who has raised him so high; he includes these considerations in a praise of Yahweh.

Thus he concludes, framing the psalm with the praise of God :  
" How glorious is Yahweh."

The keynote of the true philosophy of nature and history is the adoration of the glory of God.